# What Catholics DON'T Tell

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# What Catholics Don't Tell

Strangers in a strange land—that's the way most converts feel when they come into the Church. And quite often they have no map, no guide, and no one to show them the way.

They do have guides, of course: friends who are Catholics, the priest who instructed them, and so forth. But what these friends seem to forget, or often fail to realize, is what the convert so often needs and so rarely gets.

The convert usually needs the most basic instruction. It is like asking someone how to walk. He will reply, "Why, you just walk!" It seems an absurd question—because he is so far removed from the time when walking was not automatic.

The convert is in that position. He needs to be told to lift his right foot, carry it forward, put it down; then lift his left foot, carry it forward, and put it down. And then repeat the process.

As converts, we are children in the

Church—comparable to an infant in physical life. We need to be led by the hand and shown what to do, with kindness, with sympathy, with understanding — and time after time.

At least, that was the situation for my wife and myself. We had been living in New York when I became a Catholic. My wife had been baptized a Catholic, but had received practically no religious instruction. So we were both almost equally ignorant of much of the life of a Catholic in the Church.

## The Things That Happen

At first we thought that it was just to us that so many strange things happened. But in talking with other converts, we discovered that it was not as uncommon as we had thought—the things that "born" Catholics don't tell converts.

It isn't the matter of the instructions that are given by the priest. They are thorough, detailed, and excellent. My own course of instruction was so complete that it was practically a short course in theology.

Inwardly I was fully prepared to become a Catholic. I had read, I had studied, I had listened, and I had an ardent desire to become a Catholic. And so I was baptized.

But outwardly I was, as mentioned before, a stranger in a strange land. And the things that happened!

Take the simple matter of fulfilling the obligation to hear Mass on Sunday. The born Catholic has no problem—he knows almost by instinct what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. Since childhood days he has attended Mass regularly, and it is second nature for him to do the right thing at the right time.

He doesn't even have to think before he performs these various actions; his knees bend automatically for the genuflection, he instinctively slides onto the kneeler at the right time during the Mass, he has his hand in his pocket for the collection envelope in ample time as the usher starts up the aisle.

Not so the convert. He goes to Mass on Sunday, full of zeal, absorbed in the great mystery of the Mass, and he goes up to the front pew to see and hear. He wants to know what is going on.

## Leaflet Missal Helpful

The priest and the altar boys come into the sanctuary. The convert sits there, watching the impressive procession—and then he suddenly realizes that everyone else

is standing. Up he jumps—but by then the others have all slipped to their knees, and he stands head and shoulders above the vast congregation.

With flaming face he sinks to his knees —but by then the damage has been done. He imagines everyone is staring at him; in reality they aren't, because that happens all the time—even with born Catholics.

He buries his face in his missal and strives mightily to catch up with the priest celebrating the Mass. Of course he doesn't succeed, but he tries.

It takes a while for the convert to conquer the missal. I know it took me some time, even though I understood basically its workings. One of the most helpful aids to understanding the Mass is the Leaflet Missal, published in St. Paul, Minn. Years ago I became acquainted with it and found that it was tremendously helpful in assisting the convert to understand the Mass.

In the usual daily or Sunday missal, the unchanging prayers of the Mass (the Ordinary of the Mass) are usually in one place; and then the Proper of the Mass (or the parts that vary according to the feast day or the time) is in another part. And as the celebrant continues with the Mass, you

change from one section of the missal to the other to say the right prayers.

I still remember how confusing this was. Now, familiar as I am with the missal after almost twenty years as a Catholic, I wonder a bit at my confusion. But I do still remember how very confusing it all was. And that's where the Leaflet Missal was so helpful. It contained the entire Mass in one part—the changing prayers had been set in the proper place—and it was just a matter of reading along in the Leaflet Missal and following the priest.

### Father Stedman's Missal

Another great help was the Sunday Missal published by the Confraternity of the Precious Blood in Brooklyn. Inaugurated by the late Father Stedman, this Sunday Missal was a great help to us. It was plainly marked, in good sized type, where to turn for the varying prayers; it told you when to stand or kneel, what the various bells were for—and all you needed to follow the Mass intelligently.

We had become acquainted with these excellent helps when we lived in Wisconsin. We had moved there shortly after I became a Catholic and were very fortunate in the

priests we knew there. Our pastor there, who has since become a Bishop, distributed Father Stedman's Sunday Missal to every person in the parish. They were just handed out to all the adults on Sunday at Mass. There was no fee, no charge, and no obligation to pay for them. He did ask those who could to drop the cost in a collection box, but there was no compulsion. I don't know whether he ever got the cost back financially; and I don't think he much cared. But certainly he more than got it back in the spiritual growth of his parish, in the parishioners' greater awareness of the Sacrifice of the Mass, in their better understanding of the great Mystery on the altar.

I know it helped us tremendously; it enabled us to follow better the prayers on the altar, to feel that we were a part of the Church, an intelligent part of it.

### Matter of Collections

But there were other things connected with hearing Mass that confused us for a time. Take the matter of collections. The typical convert drops a dollar in the collection basket when it comes around, only to have the usher stop with a slight frown—and hand back nine dimes. Poor man—he

never heard of seat money! Wondering about these strange Catholic customs, he puts the dimes back in his pocket, only to have the usher come back for them a few minutes later with another basket!

He doesn't realize this happens even to born Catholics. In some dioceses seat money is collected; in others it is not. One may live in a "non-seat money" diocese and go visiting in another—where there is seat money. So the convert need not be disturbed; he has but to watch and learn, but sometimes it helps if he is told beforehand by his friends.

The first few times he receives Communion present problems too. Of course he wants to receive. Afraid he might be too late at the Communion rail, he starts up with the first group—only to find himself in the midst of the Altar and Rosary Society. With more embarrassment, and sometimes a few sharp glances, he slinks back to his seat, to make a more successful start a few minutes later.

And so it goes—trial and error for the first few years as a Catholic. Sometimes a convert is so distressed over these little errors that he becomes less a Catholic than he might have been; he lets the little bumps

along the road keep him from traveling as he might the broad road of the True Church.

### It Took Years

Fortunate is the convert married to a Catholic, or with a Catholic friend to "show him the ropes," to teach him the external practice of the Faith, the rules of Church conduct—Church etiquette if you will.

But so often, as in my own case, the background is completely non-Catholic. And even when you do have Catholic friends, you're usually on your own when you go to Mass, attend devotions, go to confession, and the like.

It took me years, for instance, to see the humor of a friend's story. Her grandmother, the first few times she went to the movies, would genuflect in the aisle before she sat down. I just didn't get it until the force of her own lifelong habit in church had become a bit engrained in me.

Or take the Rosary, as another example. It took me years to learn how to pray it.

The Rosary, to most converts, is a major mystery, even tripping us up with the simple matter of what prayers to say on which beads.

We still remember the good friend who laughed when we asked her how to pray the Rosary. She couldn't believe we didn't know how. But we didn't—no one had told us!

### On the Large Bead—

We tried to find simple pamphlets or books on the Rosary, but it took us years. What we wanted was something that would tell us just how to say the Rosary. What we needed was someone to hold our Rosary and say this:

"When you hold the crucifix, you say the Creed." And then recite the Creed for us—or better yet, give us a copy of it. "And on the first large bead, say the Our Father." Having been Protestants, we would know the Lord's Prayer, so that would not be too hard.

"And on the next three smaller beads, say the Hail Mary." It wouldn't be a bad idea to type that out for the convert too, in case he might not know it.

"Then the little medal joining the other beads starts the Mysteries of the Rosary. You say the Joyful Mysteries on Mondays and Thursdays; the Sorrowful Mysteries on Tuesdays and Fridays; and the Glorious

Mysteries on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The Mysteries said on Sunday vary with the season.

"First you say the Our Father, on the little medal or on the large bead. Then the Hail Mary for each of the ten small beads. Then you end the Mystery with 'Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. . . .'

"And then you start the next Mystery. . . ."

This seems almost a little ridiculous to me now—but really, it isn't, for many converts. It took us years to learn how to say the Rosary just because no one took the time and the trouble and had the patience to explain it to us in just that way.*

## Confession

Take the matter of confession. This is a very personal problem for the convert, who has not become used to it through weeks of instruction in school, as in the case of the born Catholic. He has been told all about the Sacrament of Penance, he knows its

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* Actually the soul of the Rosary devotion lies in the meditations upon the mysteries of the Faith. For a complete explanation, and suggested meditations, see *Getting the Most Out of the Rosary,* Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind., 25c.

workings, what it does, how it operates.

But he often does not know the simple way to go about it. Such simple things, for instance, as where to stand in your parish church while you are waiting to go to confession. If no one is in line (or sitting in a pew, as they do in some churches), how do you know whether a priest is in the confessional? Does he turn on a light to read his office when there are no confessions to be heard, or does he just cough once or twice to let the people know he is waiting for them to make their confessions?

Can you ask questions in the confessional? Will the priest—or the people in line—think you are wasting his time if you have questions that are bothering your conscience? Of course he—and they—won't, but sometimes a convert just doesn't know these things. And sometimes a convert is too embarrassed to ask questions, unless he knows they will receive a sympathetic ear—no matter how outlandish, or even scandalous, they may seem.

Novenas and missions are also new to converts. Blessed is the convert who has a good friend to take him or her to these, to help him over the rough spots until he learns

what they are all about. Novena leaflets explain the prayers and the hymns, and a convert should have one put in his hand.

Benediction could also stand explaining to the convert, with the prayers and hymns set out in front of him. There is nothing quite so disconcerting for the convert as to find everyone about him singing with verve "Tantum Ergo"—when he hasn't the slightest idea of what it is. You must remember that as a Protestant he is used to having hymn books; with a bulletin board announcing the numbers of the hymns to be sung; with announcements as to which hymns come next. And here the people start to sing—and he doesn't know what it is, why it is, or how it is.

### When a Friend Dies

One of the most difficult times a convert has to face is when a relative of a close Catholic friend dies. He doesn't know just what to do; he is used to sending flowers, but he knows that isn't quite right. And he wants to do the right thing.

He can be best helped by a mutual friend inviting him to the wake. Often he has never been to one before; he is a bit afraid to go and make some outlandish mistake;

and sometimes he doesn't go, much as he would like to. He should be invited to go with others; he might be asked to go along with another who is arranging for a funeral Mass for the mutual friend. And he might also be told what the usual Mass stipend is in the diocese, or the parish, since it may vary from one to another.

This can be done easily if the born Catholic realizes that this is all pretty new to the convert; he does not acquire it along with grace when he is baptized.

It helps, of course, if he is a member of Catholic organizations, where he takes part in such activities as a matter of course and with other members.

But he doesn't always know how to join Catholic organizations — such as the Holy Name, the Knights of Columbus, the Rosary Society, the Catholic Daughters of America.

So invite converts—even more than once or twice, if necessary—to get them into the stream of the Church's societies and activities.

### Sick Calls

Sick calls are something most Catholic families are prepared for. Converts may have heard of sick calls; they may have a vague idea about them, although of course

they know about the Sacrament of Extreme Unction. But here again the practical aspects are outside their experience. Let them know how the priest should be greeted as he comes, how the table in the sick room should be prepared, the candle, the holy water, the clean napkin, etc.

Many of these things have been covered in their instructions; but many of these things, too, have been forgotten. Catholics can help immensely these newer Catholics by informing them on these various practices of the Faith.

Schools bewilder many Catholic converts; usually they have no background of parochial school life, and have no concept, for instance, of how to talk to the Sisters. Where there are parent-teacher associations or mothers guilds and the like, they do have a chance to become acquainted with the Sisters in their schools; if there are not, they should be encouraged to become acquainted with them in other ways.

### Feels Curiously Alone

There are a number of things that the born Catholic should remember about the convert. He has taken a momentous step, one which he has usually thought over for

some time, and one that may have turned away from him many friends and relatives. He feels curiously alone; he often feels he has no one to turn to. He has stepped out of the orbit of his old circle of friends in many ways; his religious life, which is so newly important to him, is often different from theirs. The same may be true of his family; they may still be Protestants, he may be the lone Catholic in the crowd, as often happens.

This is a peculiarly lonely feeling. Catholics are nice, they are happy to have you among them, and perhaps you have known them for years. But they too have their own circle of friends, and you do not step full-blown into being one of them.

This has to grow, just as the convert's awareness of being a Catholic has to grow. Usually the convert realizes this; but sometimes the born Catholic does not.

Another point to remember is this: The born Catholic has no timidity, no reluctance in going to a priest to ask questions. The convert may have; he may have taken instructions with a class of other converts, or he may have been fortunate enough to have individual instruction.

But often he does not feel he knows a

priest well enough to go to him with his special problems—problems he may feel come because he does not understand his newly found Faith well enough; or which he may feel (and very wrongly) will embarrass a priest if he asks about them.

### Questions and Answers

He needs to be told, whenever occasion presents itself, that any priest will welcome any of his questions, will be happy to spend time with him answering these questions, and will be happy to suggest pamphlets and books which will help him get a better understanding of his religion.

You must remember too that the convert may run into Catholics who unthinkingly ask, if he is married to a Catholic girl, "Did you turn Catholic to get her?" And he will be asked questions by his non-Catholic friends, such as, "Why did you ever become a Catholic?" with the inference that he must have had a momentary lapse in his intellect to have taken so drastic a step.

And just because he is a "new" Catholic, and perhaps a bit conspicuous by that fact, he may be asked questions by his co-workers and friends that are difficult for him to answer. He will be looking for answers from

his new Catholic acquaintances and friends.

He will be worried about such commonplace things (for the born Catholic) as the baptism of a new baby. Whom can he get as sponsors, what is the usual procedure in baptism, what is the customary offering? And when does he present the offering? This varies from parish to parish sometimes, or from diocese to diocese, and a Catholic friend can be very helpful in giving the needed information.

Confirmation of his children may also be a bit bewildering, but even more so will be his own Confirmation when that time comes. He should be reassured that rarely will the Bishop ask an adult a question—and that the children have been schooled in the questions so that they know well the answers.

### To See the Procedure

But even more reassuring would be an invitation to a Confirmation, just so he can see the procedure, and know what to expect when his own Confirmation comes. Nothing is quite so frightening and bewildering as the unknown—and the new Catholic is feeling his way in an entirely new world. And where he is conspicuous as a participant, he is more nervous than ever.

This is true even in the little ceremonies of induction into a Holy Name Society and similar organizations. A rather detailed explanation would be helpful in alleviating his qualms, even though it may seem unnecessary.

There are many devotions that will be entirely new to the Catholic convert, the Nine First Fridays, for instance. Some Catholic friend might well invite him to come along, and in the course of the discussion explain just what they are, the promise of Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, and so forth.

The Family Rosary is well established in many parts of the United States—but it may have made no impression on the new Catholic at the time of the Rosary Crusade in his particular diocese. A short explanation of the work of Father Peyton, telling him how families in the diocese promised to say the Rosary together as a family every evening, would be helpful to the new Catholic. Even more helpful would be inviting him over to your own Family Rosary some night—so he can see it in operation.

Nocturnal Adoration will also be new to him. Invite him along the next time you go to Nocturnal Adoration, and perhaps the

next month he will sign up along with you for one of the hours.

### Retreats Unfamiliar

Retreats will be unfamiliar—both as a word and as a movement. Perhaps you can invite him to go along on the retreat of your society or your parish; or if you go as an individual to some retreathouse in your area, perhaps he will go along with you.

You might also tell him that a retreat is something like a withdrawal from the things of the world for a few days, to get a new look at life through the eyes of God, in the light of eternity; that it helps you to evaluate what you have been doing in and with your own life and to set new goals for yourself.

If your parish has a day of recollection, as so many do nowadays, invite him to come along with you. Tell him it is like a short retreat, explain about the conferences, the instructions by the conductor of the day of recollection, the prayers, and that it serves much the same purpose of a weekend retreat, but in a more condensed form.

Above all, look upon the new convert as your brother in Christ. He needs understanding, he needs friendship, he needs your

helpful hand as he stumbles along the new road he has chosen—chosen of his own free will—to walk with you toward eternity.

And remember this—he is a new Catholic, really new. When he goes into Church for Mass, or to say a few prayers in his new-found Faith, he has to stop and think a few seconds before he genuflects. Do I kneel on the right knee or the left, he asks himself. It will be a while before he does it as automatically as you do. That's how new he is.

He is a Catholic in mind and in spirit; but he still has to learn how to be a Catholic in practice, to do Catholic things naturally.